MOBY DICK

or

The Whale

by Herman Melville

A CONDENSATION

NOTE: *The editor's summaries of various omitted passages appear italicized and in brackets throughout the text.*

HOME COURSE APPRECIATION

TO RELEASE THE FURY OF CREATION within himself, Melville required nothing less than the terrifying vastness of the oceans, nothing less than nature's hugest and most malignant creature, and, for a "hero," a man who would defy God Himself—"What I've dared, I've willed; and what I've willed, I'll do! They think me mad; but I'm demoniac, I am madness maddened!"

With a grim eloquence that makes us gasp for breath as it pounds forward, piling majestic image on majestic image, dramatic scene on dramatic scene, Melville's story of human courage and determination has no counterpart in American literature and few in the literature of the world. It inevitably makes us think of Greek tragedy, of the full-blooded drama of the Elizabethans; above all, it makes us think of the Bible, and particularly of the Old Testament, with its rich prose and its relentless, passionate intensity. It is all, as we say, "for keeps." Human beings commit themselves to some belief or course of action, and, once they do, they must succeed or they are doomed.

"Call me Ishmael." So begins *Moby Dick*. And with that we are off on what is the greatest "chase" story in the English language. The tension mounts from episode to episode as a possessed, awe-inspiring fiend of a man hunts down an equally awe-inspiring, monstrous whale. Halfway around the world he goes on his mission of hate and destruction, through bitter cold and tropic storms, through catastrophes and violence, until at last the man and the beast confront each other in a harrowing death struggle—one of the most tremendous and unforgettable scenes in all literature.

"Call me Ishmael." The Biblical note is struck immediately with these words, and from beginning to end, Melville's genius speaks to us in the voice of prophecy, as though from the depths of a whirlwind. We remember that the Ishmael of the Bible is an outcast; Ishmael of the book is rootless and aimless, and there seems to be no reason for his existence. He serves his purpose—as narrator—and at the end,

when he leaves us, we are hardly moved to wonder what will become of him.

But then, every figure in the book is a wanderer—not merely in the obvious sense that we meet them as sailors—but also because they seem to have no roots, no deep or permanent attachments. Their moments are not heavy with brooding for loved ones at home, and we know of no one who misses them. Each man in this crew—white, Negro, Asiatic, barbarian or learned, young or old—is alone; and whatever he does, his fate seems unimportant at any time and any place. Melville does not lessen that somber impression.

The main character is, of course, Ahab, captain of the ill-fated whaler, the *Pequod*. Again we recall the Bible; in I Kings 16:33 we read that Ahab, king of Israel, husband of Jezebel and pursuer after false gods ". . . did yet more to provoke Jehovah, the God of Israel, to anger than all the kings of Israel that were before." This Ahab, and Melville's, both met the violent ends which were prophesied for them.

In tracking to death the world's mightiest creature, Captain Ahab, in this wonderfully symbolical book, is really assailing Heaven itself. He defies and challenges its elemental power and mystery—and all the while he knows, deep in his heart, that it will cost him his life. He knows that it means the doom of every one who is with him. But he does not hold back. His fierceness and twisted grandeur overwhelm his crew, and with unquestioning faith these men, of all races, become his tools, and Ahab commits his life, and theirs, and their ship—their whole world—to vengeance. He must kill the monster which, in an earlier encounter, had outraged him and torn off his leg.

Ahab knows that if the beast has slain and mutilated men, it was nothing but the brute instinct of the universe. But that, he says, may be "the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! . . . That inscrutable thing is what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him."

And so Ahab takes his place beside other great heaven-storming heroes: Prometheus, who challenged the power of Zeus by bringing fire and the arts to civilize mankind and was cruelly punished for it; Lucifer, who would "rather rule in hell than serve in heaven"; and Faust, who sold his soul to the devil for knowledge and power.

THE "BUSINESS" OF WHALING

IN MOBY DICK, MELVILLE HAS WRITTEN A BOOK about whaling—an industry which was even in 1850 going into its decline. Today

whaling keeps up with modern technology, and the greatest of all mammalian creatures is tracked down with the aid of electronic devices, pursued in speedy steel boats, killed by explosive harpoons fired from guns, blown up with compressed air, and processed aboard a "factory ship."

But in Melville's day, whaling, which he referred to as "a business," still was a combat between man and beast. As such, it belonged to a tradition so ancient that its roots are buried in the remotest memories of mankind. Through the ages men have recorded the stories of heroic struggles with other creatures, real or imaginary; but for sheer peril, nothing can equal the struggle which takes place on water, the natural habitat of the enemy. The mammoth sperm whale, which might be almost as big as the whaling vessel, was harpooned and finally killed from a boat that was smaller than a lifeboat. In it generally rode the officer in command, four oarsmen, a harpooner, and half a ton or so of equipment. This included a tub which contained four hundred yards of Manila line to which the harpoon was tied.

It took great courage and skill to row almost within arm's length of the tricky whale, and to drive a harpoon deep into the huge body. The rope would shoot out like a streak, "hot and hissing," as the stricken animal sounded or ran before making his counterattack—and woe to any man who was not clear of the line! Supreme skill was needed to handle the boat as it cleaved through the water behind the maddened whale. At any moment he might turn on the straining oarsmen, shoot his great bulk twenty or thirty feet into the air, and smash their boat to splinters.

MOBY DICK AS A MASTERPIECE OF LITERATURE

Many others had written about whales and whaling before—and many have since; it is an epic theme. But Melville's book would not have attained its present position in world literature if it only described the details of an industry, no matter how romantic or heroic that industry might be. What Melville did—and what all great artists must do in their various ways—was to set down, with deep insight, the passions, hopes, frustrations and fears of all humanity as he had experienced them. Other writers have given us books on whaling; Melville's book, based on whaling, is a book about mankind.

His themes are the profoundest: man's destiny, free will, death. He touches on countless subjects of the deepest importance: the equality of the races, the meaning of education, morals and social conscience, the question of value and the good life. He is hilariously funny, sly and

mocking, sometimes a little overblown but usually so awesome and inspiring in his use of language that we search for his equal only among the greatest achievements in the literary art.

Such a book could not have been written without profound first-hand knowledge of its subject; Ishmael, speaking for Melville in *Moby Dick* says, ". . . a whale-ship was my Yale College and my Harvard." Therefore, let us acquaint ourselves with a brief account of the author's life.

MELVILLE'S CAREER

FATE WAS NOT KIND TO HERMAN MELVILLE. The man who wrote one of America's greatest novels died in relative obscurity. One newspaper, almost grudgingly it would seem, printed a few lines about his passing in 1891. His literary career was like one of those giant stars that smolder awhile, then suddenly flare up in brief but cosmic brilliance, and quickly subside. He was never able to recapture that brilliance; the writing of *Moby Dick* seems to have burned out his genius by the time he was thirty-two.

He was hounded by poverty, ill-health, and family disasters—his father died shortly after a violent mental derangement and his own sons predeceased him, one by suicide or accident, and the other of tuberculosis. He had known a spell of popularity as a writer, but that early success turned to bitter mockery as critics and public abused or ignored his later, nobler work and asked only for popular fiction. "What I feel most moved to write, that is banned—it will not pay. Yet write the other way, I cannot. So the product is a final hash, and all my books are botches," he wrote to Nathaniel Hawthorne in 1851, the year of *Moby Dick*'s publication.

In time, he was all but forgotten, a lost continent of literature. Then, with the centennial of his birth, in 1919, came rediscovery. First literary scholars and then the public began to realize Melville's towering stature. Hundreds of essays, biographies, and studies appeared; new editions of his books were printed, and his last prose work, *Billy Budd*, written about 1889, finally was published, in 1924.

MELVILLE'S CHILDHOOD

During the Panic of 1819, on August 1, Herman Melville was born in New York City, of English and Dutch stock which had settled in America before the Revolution. His father had been a prosperous importer, but with changing business conditions he began to run into

"Short draughts—long swallows, men; 'tis hot as Satan's hoof."

financial difficulties. Still, young Herman's early life was outwardly pleasant enough, although he seems to have been something of a disappointment to his parents. For his cultivated father he was "very backward in speech and somewhat slow in comprehension, but of a docile and amiable disposition," and for his mother, who seems to have been an unsympathetic, overbearing woman, he was not "so fond of his Books as to injure his health."

The family fortunes declined until in 1830 Herman's father was thrown into bankruptcy, and two years later, when the lad was not yet 13, the father died, a physical and mental ruin. The family was left penniless. One can only speculate on such things, but surely the strain of grim earnestness which runs through *Moby Dick*—the sense of disaster which hangs over it—had their beginnings in the atmosphere of fear, anxiety, and defeat which soaked into the pores of this impressionable and unprepared youth.

MELVILLE'S VOYAGES

HIS SCHOOLING ENDED AT 15. After drifting from bank-clerking to farming and teaching—he failed at other attempts—Melville took to the sea. We don't know precisely what turned him this way; Ishmael's poetic, half-mocking explanation will have to do: "Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; . . . then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can." In 1837 he signed on as a cabin boy on a ship bound for Liverpool.

The sea "got" him. He wrote of "a wonderful thing in me, that responded to all the wild commotion of the outer world. . . . A wild bubbling and bursting at my heart, as if a hidden spring gushed out there. . . ." He also spoke of "the miserable dog's life of the sea," cleaning up after pigs and chickens, "commanded like a slave and set to work like an ass; vulgar and brutal men lording it over me. . . ." This voyage provided the basis for his fourth book, *Redburn;* yet despite all the hardships and cruelties described there, the sea was in his blood.

Back in the States after this short voyage, Melville flopped about like a fish out of water. He taught for a while but was restless and unhappy. Other jobs were hard to find, for the country was struggling to recover from a depression. But there was always the sea, for the dan-

ger and hardships discouraged all but the hopelessly romantic, the reckless, the hardy, and the desperate.

Melville signed on as a member of the crew of the *Acushnet,* a whaling vessel that sailed from New Bedford, Massachusetts, at the very beginning of January 1841, bound for Cape Horn and the South Seas. He was in his twenty-first year. His own story for the next three and a half years is an amazing odyssey.

Life aboard the *Acushnet* provided the factual material which was to be the basis of *Moby Dick*. He learned the thousand and one details of whaling, so vividly described in the book; and the long, dull days and hollow, black nights gave him plenty of time to try to fathom the meaning and purpose of his existence. As time went by and bad luck dogged the *Acushnet,* conditions became intolerable; after eighteen months, Melville had had enough of the tyrannical captain, the surly crew, the routine which was only infrequently broken by the thrill of the chase.

SOUTH SEAS ADVENTURES

When the whaler put in for supplies and recruits at Nuku Hiva, in the Marquesas Islands, Melville and another sailor jumped ship and escaped to the interior. They soon found themselves in a valley where a cannibalistic tribe, the Typee, lived. For some reason not readily understood, the Typee were hospitable and took the unsuspecting boys into "protective custody," as we would say today. Four weeks or so were passed in this barbaric paradise, during which Melville shared in the life and pleasures of his hosts, who carefully concealed their cannibalism.

More than once, on ships and in ports of call, Melville had been horrified by the misery, lawlessness, and injustices he had seen. In contrast to the vices and cruelties of civilization, the primitive way of life seemed admirable. Still, he began to grow restless; Melville was not the type to go native. Besides, a painful leg infection resisted all the primitive incantations and was getting worse, and no doubt Melville began to fear his leg might have to be amputated. Was this thought the origin of Captain Ahab's mutilation and ivory leg?

Melville had by now also grown suspicious of the Typee's dietary habits, and he decided that escape was imperative. Somehow, with the help of a friendly native, he managed to steal away from his captors and to get aboard an Australian whaler, the *Lucy Ann,* which had sent a boat to rescue him.

THE END OF MELVILLE'S SEA ADVENTURES

LIFE ABOARD THE SECOND WHALER was even worse than it had been on the first. When the ship anchored in the harbor of Papeete, in Tahiti, the crew mutinied, Melville among them. After his arrest and escape, and a short period of beachcombing, he finally tried his fortunes with a third whaler, the *Charles and Henry*, out of Nantucket, which eventually discharged him in Hawaii.

For four months he did all sorts of odd jobs—even setting up pins in a bowling alley in Honolulu—until he enlisted as an ordinary seaman on the frigate *United States*. With the Navy he revisited many familiar spots in the South Pacific, and journeyed to South America and Mexico, but he was thoroughly outraged by the brutality of the discipline then common aboard ship. After a fourteen-month service Melville, aged twenty-five, was discharged in Boston.

MELVILLE'S FIRST BOOKS

Melville's life as a seaman had ended. From his voyages he had brought back fabulous experiences which he used in writing most of his books. First came two novels based on his South Seas experiences, *Typee* (1846), which tells of his life with the cannibal tribe, and *Omoo* (1847), "a narrative of adventures in the South Seas"; and then *Mardi* (1849), "a half-mad, rather wonderful allegory" of the South Seas. The books followed each other in a rush. *Redburn* (1849), the story of his first voyage, was written, Melville says, to pay his bills. Next came *White Jacket* (1850), written in a little more than two months, a story of life aboard a man-of-war, which exposed the brutalities the author had witnessed in the Navy and was partly responsible for the abolition of flogging. And then *Moby Dick* (1851).

THE WRITING OF MOBY DICK

AFTER HIS RETURN FROM THE SOUTH SEAS, Melville, to his eventual disgust, came to be called "the man who lived with cannibals." He at once profited from this reputation by writing *Typee*. On the strength of the book's success, Melville married Elizabeth Shaw, daughter of Chief Justice Lemuel Shaw of Boston, and settled down to what became a harassed and unhappy married life on a farm in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. It was there that he wrote *Moby Dick*. There is evidence that Melville first conceived it as a straight whaling adventure, and then stopped midway in composition to rewrite and transform it on a much vaster and nobler pattern. The inspiration had

come partly from Nathaniel Hawthorne, a friend and neighbor to whom Melville dedicated *Moby Dick*. At this time he also made an even greater discovery—Shakespeare. "Dolt and ass that I am," he wrote, "I have lived 29 years, and until a few days ago never made close acquaintance with the divine William. . . . Now I exult over it, page after page."

Evidently the immensity of his theme, also, was intoxicating. To a friend he wrote: "Give me a condor's quill for my pen! Give me Vesuvius' crater for my inkstand! Friends! Hold up my arms! For in the mere act of penning my thoughts of this Leviathan [Moby Dick], they weary me, and make me faint with the outreaching comprehension of their sweep, as if to include the whole world of the sciences!"

When *Moby Dick* appeared in 1851 its reception was mixed, and it did not sell well. There was soon another setback. In 1853 a fire in the warehouse of his publishers destroyed the stock of Melville's books and also the plates from which they were printed. Sales did not warrant a resetting of the type, and the books were not reprinted for more than half a century. Starved for want of public acknowledgment and understanding, depressed by critical attacks, Melville never again rose to the height of *Moby Dick*. A subtle psychological novel, *Pierre, or the Ambiguities,* came out in 1852, but was too involved, and his later novels and books of poetry were also failures.

THE LAST YEARS

The rest of the Melville story is a heart-breaking descent. The short fame he had enjoyed following his first two or three books now became a goad and a mockery. His financial problems mounted, his health was bad, his marriage had soured, and for forty years there were only occasional periods of relative happiness. After a trip to Europe and the Near East, financed by a relative, Melville in 1866 managed to find work as a customs inspector in New York City. The titan of American literature held this monotonous, ill-paying job for nineteen years.

A small inheritance made it possible for him to pass his last six years in peaceful solitude. Shortly before his death in 1891, a sudden flare-up of creative energy resulted in *Billy Budd,* his first prose work in over thirty years, a manuscript that remained unpublished until the rediscovery of Melville a quarter of a century later.

Whatever the merits of his other works, it is clear that his fame as a literary artist will rest on *Moby Dick*.

"It took great courage and skill to row almost within arm's length of the tricky whale, and to drive a harpoon deep into the huge body."

CRAFTSMANSHIP

MELVILLE IS A MASTER OF STORYTELLING, and to spin out his yarn he calls upon virtually every technique available to the author. The reader who is attentive to the various kinds of writing in this strange and wonderful book, and to Melville's magnificent use of words, will find unforgettable pleasure.

There are long passages of straight descriptive prose of such precision and lucidity that they are like a handbook of whaling. Every step is perfectly clear to us as the whale is processed, the barrels fill up with oil, and the vast carcass is despoiled of everything that can be used. We see it all—and the smells linger in our nostrils.

Ishmael tells us all about it, and nothing of importance escapes him. He is narrator of the story—but he is also one of the crew. As the narrator, he knows everything that is to happen, for he has lived through it and survived the final catastrophe; from his vantage point he is able to place events in wide perspectives. But he is also a member of the crew, and as such is bodily present, a firsthand witness and commentator, but ignorant of the future. This device, which was also used by Dante in the *Inferno,* and by Proust in *Remembrance of Things Past,* permits the narrator to be omniscient and yet remain in the thick of the action.

Fascinating as he is in his purely narrative passages, Melville achieves his real greatness when he wants to evoke a scene through the sheer magic of word-sound and imagery. A master of drama, too, he steps up the intensity of his material until he shoots at us a smashing climax. Here is a passage characteristic of both Melville's word-magic and sense of drama. He has been describing how the blubber is boiled for its oil. It is midnight: ". . . sail had been made; the wind was freshening; the wild ocean darkness was intense. But that darkness was licked up by the fierce flames. . . . The burning ship drove on, as if remorselessly commissioned to some vengeful deed . . . as to and fro, in their front, the harpooneers wildly gesticulated with their huge pronged forks and dippers; as the wind howled on, and the sea leaped, and the ship groaned and dived, and yet steadfastly shot her red hell further and further into the blackness of the sea and the night, and scornfully champed the white bone in her mouth, and viciously spat around her on all sides; then the rushing *Pequod,* freighted with savages, and laden with fire, and burning a corpse and plunging into that blackness of darkness, seemed the material counterpart of her monomaniac commander's soul."

MELVILLE'S USE OF WORDS

ONE CRITIC HAS SHOWN that Melville's style is so poetic that *Moby Dick* can easily be written down as blank verse. The passage just quoted is a good example of the poetic use of words, investing things with deeper meaning, largely through unexpected comparison with other things, and using words with utmost economy. We sense Melville's uncanny feeling for the textures of words—hard, soft, smooth-flowing, choppy—and his remarkable control of tempo—now causing us to slow up, and now forcing us virtually to chase after the onrushing phrases. Let us note also the increase in intensity—of sound, motion, personification, symbolism—to the very end of the passage. Here, as in a thousand other places in the book, we see how Melville chooses the word which imitates the sound—the wind "howled," the ship "groaned" and the spray viciously "spat." Over and over again we are dazzled by his metaphors, similes, and other figures of speech.

Alliteration is another important element; and in the following example, note how the sounds are clipped and sharp, ejected almost as though they were bitter in the mouth. The passage concerns death at sea: ". . . ye know now the desolation that broods in bosoms like these. What bitter blanks in those black-bordered marbles which cover no ashes! What despair in those immovable inscriptions! What deadly voids and unbidden infidelities in the lines that seem to gnaw upon all Faith, and refuse resurrections to the beings who have placelessly perished without a grave."

One notable—but still quite characteristic—bit of word-play occurs well along in the book. All sorts of indirect references and allusions have been made to Ahab's nemesis, the white whale. He has not been mentioned by name, and his entrance will come only when the author has strained our anticipation to the utmost. When, at length, Moby Dick is announced—and it is still some time before he enters the action "in person"—his name is repeated eleven times in a little more than a page, and the effect is like the sounding of trumpets.

INTERPRETATIONS OF MOBY DICK

With the revival of Melville interest in 1919, many interpretations of *Moby Dick* began to appear; they have continued ever since. For some Moby Dick symbolizes the beauty and terror of nature, and Captain Ahab, the tortured genius who has the courage to rebel against the sway of blind, insensate power. Others have seen Moby Dick as humanity pursued by the mad Ahab, seeking revenge. For Lewis

Mumford, Ahab won his battle over himself by conquering his fear of Moby Dick and his inclination to yield to his senseless strength. Yet Ahab was destroyed because, intent upon destroying the enemy of humanity, he lost his own humanity. His was the quest of the absolute, the ultimate, a mad venturing which recognized no limits to mortal striving. Clifton Fadiman's idea is striking: the deep meaning of the Ahab–Moby Dick relationship is that the two are one; Moby Dick exists in the ocean of Ahab's brain.

For Matthiessen and other critics, on the other hand, Ahab symbolized the egoistic, strong-willed, ruthless financier-capitalist, and thus reflected the disease from which nineteenth-century America was suffering. A number of commentators have also given Freudian interpretations of the novel. For example, Ahab is seen as the son pursuing the father figure who has mutilated and deeply insulted him. Still other writers have claimed that Ahab's hatred is directed at God, and have then identified Ahab with Melville.

These are extreme theories. Those who see Ahab's kinship with the Biblical Job and Shakespeare's Lear are on safer ground. Both of these men suffered outrageous wrongs which were unmerited, and each challenged the mysterious cause. There are many interpretations of *Moby Dick* because the problem of evil becomes at last intensely personal. Each reader finds his own meaning.